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ABSTRACT

A study conducted in 1986 found that parents were the critical influence on the religious beliefs and commitment of their adolescent sons and daughters, while the adolescent's peers seemed to have no significant effect. In addition, the content of the beliefs did not seem to act as a strong reinforcer. Thirty-two of the 390 subjects who participated in the original study were interviewed in-depth at a later date to explore the content of their beliefs, how they had come to hold them, and what aspects of religious commitment seemed to yield the most personal reward. A content analysis of the interviews revealed that parents exerted more influence on religiousness than did peers because parents appeared to care more and they reinforced religious participation that was similar to their own. Religious beliefs seem to be rewarding when they are informed and consistent, but often this is not the case with adolescents. As a consequence, emotional rewards for religiousness are more pervasive and powerful for adolescents than are rewards related directly to the religious beliefs themselves. (Author/NB)

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The reinforcements of religiousness in adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Ozorak (1986) found that parents were the critical influence on the religious beliefs and commitment of their adolescent sons and daughters, while the adolescent's peers seemed to have no significant effect. She also found that the content of the beliefs did not seem to act as a strong reinforcer. Thirty-two of Ozorak's subjects were interviewed in depth at a later date to explore the content of their beliefs, how they had come to hold them, and what aspects of religious commitment seemed to yield the most personal reward. A content analysis of these interviews revealed that parents exert more influence on religiousness than peers because they appear to care more and they reinforce religious participation that is similar to their own. Religious beliefs seem to be rewarding when they are informed and consistent, but often this is not the case with adolescents. As a consequence, emotional rewards for religiousness are more pervasive and powerful for adolescents than rewards related directly to the beliefs themselves.

Introduction

It has been asserted that religion is important for good adjustment and self-esteem in adolescence (Strommen, 1974; Williams, 1967; and others). Although the model of religious commitment put forth by Stark and Bainbridge (1980) suggests that the mystical aspects of religion make it uniquely helpful, the social aspects of religion seem to be far more salient to adolescents (Knox, 1975; Ash, 1969). Since the importance of peer relationships increases during adolescence (McCartney and Weiss, 1985), it might be supposed that the social support of peers is the essential aspect of religious involvement. However, de Vaus (1983) found that parents were more influential than peers in determining the religious orientation of their adolescent offspring. In contrast, Dudley (1978) found that the adolescent children of fundamentalist parents were often quite alienated from their parents' faith. In a recent study, Ozorak (1986) confirmed the primacy of parents' influence on the adolescent's beliefs and religious commitment, particularly if the family was close and the parents were very religious. What remains to be explored is why the beliefs of the parents should have such a strong effect while those of peers exert little or no influence in this area, unlike so many other areas. It is

also unclear why the beliefs themselves should be such weak reinforcers, given their supposed centrality to the quality of "religiousness". This study was designed to address these questions.

It was hypothesized that parents would be more apt to make an issue of religious participation than peers, in keeping with Bainbridge and Stark's finding (1981) that beliefs are generally irrelevant to peer group friendships (except for members of religious groups in tension with the socio-cultural environment, such as evangelical or "Born-Again" Christians). It was expected that parents, especially if actively religious themselves, would reward the adolescent with approval and support for religious participation similar to their own; likewise, nonreligious parents might reinforce nonparticipation. Catholic and Jewish subjects were expected to report more pressure from parents to conform, since Catholics and Jews were less likely to change their religious affiliation than Protestants or nonbelievers (Ozorak, 1986). It was anticipated that subjects' beliefs would be confused, vague, or contradictory, especially those of the younger subjects, rendering them less effective as a reinforcer than social approval.

Method

Ozorak's (1986) 390 subjects filled out a survey questionnaire on their religious beliefs and participation, family background, and connectedness to family and to peers. One to six months later, 32 of these subjects, 17 high school age and 15 college age, half relatively religious and half relatively nonreligious, were contacted for an in-depth semi-structured interview about their beliefs, how they had come to hold them, and what aspects of their religiousness they found personally most rewarding (nonbelievers were asked what they thought was most rewarding to their religious peers). The interview format was chosen because it allowed for careful probing of subjects' attitudes and opinions while respecting the personal and individual nature of their beliefs (Allport, 1950). A similar study by Hay (1979) suggests that inquiries of this kind require a qualitative, open-ended approach. Comparisons between the 32 interview subjects and the other subjects confirmed that, except for a disproportionate number of subjects who had earlier reported having changed their affiliation (almost 40%, compared to 23%), there were no significant differences in religiousness and none in connectedness to family or peers.

Results

Table 1 shows a partial content analysis of the interview subjects' religious beliefs.

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insert Table 1 about here

It is worth noting that only 44% were certain that there is a God, only 34% were sure of an afterlife, and only 10% (three subjects) were willing to assert that the Bible is completely and literally true. Less than a quarter of these subjects thought that prayer helps people directly, though 57% thought it might be indirectly helpful (e.g., catharsis). Of those who believed in God, slightly less than half conceived of God as human-like and personal. Nonparametric correlations were run between questionnaire and interview measures of subjects' belief in God and in an afterlife. Reliability was only moderate for both (for belief in God, rho=.65; for belief in an afterlife, rho=.61). Although it is possible that this reflects only instrument effects, subjects' remarkable candor on the questionnaire and in the interview suggests that their beliefs changed during the several month hiatus between administration of the two. Thus, it seems that beliefs are not very stable during adolescence, even for those who do not actually change

affiliation. This was borne out by the remarks of a number of subjects. This statement of a Catholic, college-age female is typical of many:

> I always thought I did [believe in God], and then I wasn't sure... I think I believe in something, but I'm not sure what it is.

Even those who expressed some confidence in their beliefs were apt to say that the beliefs were "right for them" and not necessarily for others, and that "nobody really knows what is right." It follows that if beliefs are not held securely, they are unlikely to be effective rewards. In fact, most subjects reported that examining their beliefs made them less religious. The exceptions to this rule were the Born-Again Christians, all of whom felt that examining their beliefs strengthened their commitment. These subjects not only seemed to have more internally consistent belief systems, but were far more familiar with the doctrine of their faith (all three quoted the Bible extensively during the interview). Thus, it seems that beliefs are rewarding when they are sufficiently informed, consistent, and based in an authority acceptable to the individual holding them, but that is not the case for most adolescents.

The emotional rewards of religious participation, however, are immediate. Even emotional closeness to God can

be inferred from direct evidence, if we suppose that discussing a problem aloud, as often occurs in prayer, has noticeable benefits. Such an interpretation probably requires appropriate teaching: of eight Catholic or evangelical Christian subjects who mentioned connectedness as the most important reward of religion, six referred to God and two referred to other people, while among the other subjects (Protestants, Jews, nonbelievers, and others), ten referred to connectedness to other people and none mentioned closeness to God. This difference is statistically significant ($X^2=8.13$, $p<.005$). Connectedness was by far the most common type of reward identified by the subjects, while answers to questions of human existence, the most direct reflection of belief content, accounted for less than half as many responses (see Table 1).

Almost all subjects, regardless of affiliation, seemed aware of the social reinforcement and sanction applied by their parents; half of the subjects interviewed spontaneously mentioned some form of family pressure to conform in religious participation, at least until the adolescent reached a certain age (often 18) or was confirmed in the church. There did not seem to be any differences between Catholic and Portestant parents in requiring church attendance. There was no spontaneous mention of nonbelieving

parents pressuring their sons or daughters to remain nonreligious. Religious parents of all affiliations not only required more conformity, but seemed to inspire more by example. Adolescents whose parents were religious also reported conforming out of a desire to avoid hurting their parents' feelings. Two subjects, one Catholic and one Jewish, described their families' concern that they marry within the faith. Two of the Born-Again Christians mentioned parental resistance to their religious conversion. A Mann-Whitney test confirmed that those who had changed affiliation tended to experience a lack of family support for their new beliefs (z=-3.24, $p<.001$). By contrast, of the 18 subjects who felt that the religious views of some of their friends differed from their own beliefs, only three felt that it was an issue, and these were the three Born-Again subjects.

Conclusion

In summary, the hypotheses were largely confirmed. Parents were perceived as caring more about religious participation than peers did, and most adolescents were strongly motivated to avoid friction with parents over religion, even if their own beliefs had changed. Only the Born-Again subjects reported that religiousness was an issue in their peer relationships. There did not seem to be any interfaith differences in parental pressure to participate in religion, although religious parents of all faiths applied more pressure than nonreligious parents, both directly and indirectly. Catholic and Jewish families may be more resistant to conversion or to interfaith marriage, but there were not enough data to confirm this.

As expected, most adolescents' belief systems were not sufficiently complete or consistent to act as rewards in themselves, but beliefs did seem to be rewarding for the few exceptions. The expected age difference in clarity and completeness of belief system was not found, probably due to individual differences in speed of maturation and the age ceiling of the subject pool. Many subjects seemed uneasy about the confused nature of their beliefs and expressed some wistfulness about the security of organized religion, even when they professed a distrust of it.

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Table 1

Adolescents' Religious Beliefs: Interview Responses

Variable	Response	% Endorsing	n
Believe in God:	definitely yes	44	(32)
	probably yes	28	
	don't know	19	
	no	9	
Imagine God as:	human-like	48	(25)
	a force	52	
Believe Jesus was divine:	yes	47	(30)
	no	53	
Believe Scriptures are literally true:	all of them	10	(30)
	parts of them	70	
	none of them	20	
Believe in an afterlife:	definitely yes	34	(32)
	probably yes	31	
	don't know	19	
	no	16	
Believe prayer helps people:	directly	23	(30)
	indirectly	57	
	not at all	20	

Table 1, continued

Variable	Response	% Endorsing	n
Beliefs have changed:	more religious	28	(32)
	no change	44	
	less religious	28	
How certain of beliefs:	very certain	16	(31)
	moderately	36	
	slightly	32	
	not at all	16	
Most important thing people get from religion:	connectedness	48	(37)*
	- to God	16	
	- to other people	32	
	security	19	
	answers	19	
	morality	14	

* Percentages given in terms of responses, not subjects. Nine subjects gave two responses, three did not respond, and one response was uncodable.